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Culturalism and the "New" Poetry. A Poem by Pedro Gimferrer: "Cascabeles" from *Arde el mar* (1966)

Abstract

The study deals with the group of Spanish poets commonly called the "novisimos" or "promocion de 1970," using as a base a poem by Pedro Gimferrer published in 1966. It studies the aesthetic breakthrough achieved by this generation, highlighting the concept of "culturalism" that critics used to define it twenty years ago. It examines the equivocal uses to which this concept can be put, and describes its correct meaning in the light of the aesthetic to which it refers. It then studies the mechanisms implicit in the writing of this non-confessional lyric poetry, centering it on two complementary procedures: the use of a historical *persona* that serves as an analogue ("personaje historico analogico"), and that of another work of art that functions as an objectifying device ("obra de arte ajena objetivadora"). It considers these in the light of two perspectives: the overcoming of neo-romantic rhetoric, and the participation of the reader.

Keywords

Spanish poets, poetry, novismos, promocion de 1970, Pedro Gimferrer, aestheticism, culturalism, historical persona, persona, personaje historico analogico, obra de arte ajena objetivadora, neoromantic theory

Culturalism and "New" Poetry. A Poem by
Pedro Gimferrer: 'Cascabeles' from *Arde el mar* (1966)

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Translated by Frederick H. Fornoff

Arde el mar (*The Sea is Burning*), published in 1966, is the book that inaugurates the radical change which, with respect to the immediate tradition of postwar Spanish poetry, was realized by the so-called "novísimos" or poets of the generation of 1970. "Cascabeles" ("Bells") is a perfectly representative example of that rupture, of the new concept of the poetic text that it occasions, and of the first moment in the evolution of the poets to whom I refer.

The change that is brought about in the second half of the decade of the sixties has the effect of disorienting readers as well as critics of poetry in Spain, because it is marked by an absolute lack of response to the expectations of both. Those expectations, as in every moment of literary history, are determined by an implicit assumption of continuity of the tendencies admitted as forming part of the prevailing literary universe or as having formed part of it in the recent past, and as having achieved, in both cases, majority acceptance. The horizon of expectations of the Spanish reader of poetry in the seventh decade of this century consisted in essence of two fundamental elements: 1) the direct use of the confessional and confidential "I," which derives from the concept of language as a non-problematical means of communication for the transmission of ethical messages pertaining to the human condition, messages that allude without mediation to a necessarily shared referential space (occasionally involving ideological, religious or moral obstacles) between author and reader; and 2) a product of the same concept of language, the establishment of the text as a vehicle for the transmission of critical messages relative to the social and political environment. In this second case, the dogma of the social function of the text, which theoretically embraces the dogma of its reception by the majority,

presupposes an objectivist perspective (descriptive, narrative, or at least allusive) directed at the contemporary environment, a programmatic conclusion more or less veiled due to the threat of censorship, and finally an effort to make the text transparent in light of the capacities of an average reader not distinguished by any special sensitivity or cultural sophistication. In summary: a non-problematical, transparent language, and an identifiable referent-automatic, contemporary, ordinary (or call it *the story of the heart* or *the captive nation*).

The poetry of the "Novísimos" and those like them brought these dogmas to crisis and in so doing generated a mechanical and uncomprehending response, which can be summed up in the term "culturalism," whereby its definition and its rejection were undertaken simultaneously.

"Culturalism" is a dangerous and equivocal word, and I cannot use it without first addressing its nuances. The suffix "-ism" implies tendency, school, movement, program or doctrine, and the term that precedes it (when used to denominate an aesthetic attitude or an attitude pertaining to a different environment) is intended as a key word summing up the pretensions of said attitude in an essential and precise way. From this point of view I cannot agree to the use of "culturalism" as a label for the most recent Spanish poetry, because the accumulation and exhibition of cultural (in the sense of "learned," "erudite," or "bookish") literary elements were never in themselves the primary intent or ultimate motive for the aesthetic change of the seventies, but rather a medium or a consequence of sounder and less superficial motivations. Only in minor and imitative writers do we find the reproduction of external literary aspects organically isolated from their psychic and historical-literary motivations. That is the reason why the term "culturalism" (like its analogue, "venetianism"), appearing with perjorative nuance, was not adopted by those against whom it was directed, in contrast to what in analogous circumstances occurred with "Fauvism" or "Cubism." The ostentation of culture *per se* is to be found only in the decorators and *nouveaux riches* of poetry.

If "culturalism" is invalid as key-word, manifesto, or basic trait, it can indeed be used as a descriptive term for referring to determined features of the texts. Understood in this way, it is explicable, in my opinion, by virtue of three things: 1) the public and peaceful possession of culture, manifested in a natural and spontaneous manner in

every act of daily life, ordinary as well as extraordinary, common to these latest poets in the act of writing (provided that it derives from an equivalence between quotidian and cultural experience that will facilitate the changes of sensibility prompting the need for knowledge and self-knowledge to which the writing responds); 2) the adoption of a conception of literature that admits no extraliterary purpose and that discards any preconception that might tend to limit or direct the creative act; and 3) the necessity of writing a lyric poetry free from the limitations of the romantic tradition.

These three characteristics rendered inevitable at the moment of rupture in the seventies the confrontation with the poetic tradition of the Spanish postwar period, but naturally that confrontation was not its ultimate aim, but rather the conviction that it was necessary to assume the legacy of an entire poetic tradition developed throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, culminating in Mallarmé and in the avant garde and which begins by considering the idea of an art reproductive of reality horrible, and horrible too the direct expression of the "I" by way of sentimental formulas. For the protagonists of the rupture to which I have been referring, the coincidence with that tradition came about at the initial moment of their literary adventure, due to their having to assert their dissidence with respect to an immediate Spanish poetic tradition dominated, in its regressivity, by neo-romanticism and civic poetry.

I think that we would have all adopted as a motto a sonnet by Mallarmé, written around 1895, which I quote in translation:

- 1 To the soul in its fullness
- 2 when we slowly breathe it out
- 3 in a series of smoke rings
- 4 one abolished by the next

- 5 any cigar bears witness
- 6 wisely burning as
- 7 the ash falls free
- 8 of its kiss of fire.

- 9 So the chorus of romances
- 10 flies effortlessly to your lips:
- 11 you who begin, withhold
- 12 the vileness of the real.

- 13 Excessively precise meaning cancels
- 14 your vague literature.

It consists of imaginary advice to a novice in the poetic exercise (v. 11). In the first eight verses it affirms the fact that the profound and meditative expression of one smoking a cigar and indulging in the corresponding ritual gestures is proof of the existence of the soul. Mallarmé is not interested in the soul in religious, but rather in literary terms: "soul" therefore is equivalent to a receptacle for emotions directly expressed in accord with the romantic tradition. Verses 9 and 10 allude mockingly to the ease with which one falls into a "romance" (a passage, in the lyric genre, given over to the tritest sentimental expression) from that aesthetic stance. Verses 11 and 12 succinctly and scornfully dismiss realism, as the last two verses dispose of the concept of language as communication, as a transparent and referential discourse aimed at recalling for the reader reality or conventional psychology. The totally depoetizing predictability of referential discourse (verse 13) dissolves it into nothingness as a literary text (verse 14): what is "precise" with respect to its significance ends up being equated with "vague" (insignificant) as text. Poeticity is incompatible with the instrumental use of language for referential, realistic, or psychologicistic ends.

The new poetry finds itself therefore in the aesthetic position of producing a lyric discourse subject to Mallarméan restrictions. "Cascabeles" puts into practice a solution to the problem that in essence consists of using the first person, and at the same time avoiding it by an indirect process of expression of the "I" through the mention of an historical personage situated in a vital circumstance analogous to that which the author feels, and attempting to reconstruct that circumstance imaginatively with sufficient objective and descriptive elements to allow the reader to reconstruct it as well.

This said, one unfamiliar with the psychic mechanisms of the poet might think that it is just a matter of setting out on a quest through encyclopaedias and dictionaries until one discovers the appropriate personage. Nothing could be further from the truth: the basic emotion that is the node of the poem, the exploration of this emotion becoming necessary through the writing, presents itself already incarnated in its personage from the first moment, because the author's subconscious has selected it instinctively from the data-bank of cultural memory. And the very process of that selection has come

about in the same way, when the impossibility of formulating the proper emotions through the direct lyric "I" becomes interiorized and converted also into a subconscious mechanism (I mean, of course, in an authentic poet). Both of these processes have been mediated by the possession of culture, never by an adventitious culture or one superimposed on the creative act, but a culture integrated into the primeval foundation of the poem, contrary to what the habitual brandishers of the term "culturalism" supposed and continue to suppose.

That is to say, the undeniable cultural contribution which is the historical personage does not have a decorative purpose. The poem thus conceived will not be narrative but lyric, since the author speaks of himself without the need to name himself either by way of an interposed persona or by diligence; he speaks of himself by analogy. For this reason I have proposed on other occasions the denomination *poems of analogous historical personage*. In these, the closed expressive field of emotions, cloistered historically in their primitive form, is amplified to infinity, since there is an endless number of personages capable of representing paradigmatically any emotion or vital situation. Each poem written in this way will be new, and what might have had to be expressed by struggling with a few overworked topics becomes a horizon of originality and innovation, but more importantly, of unpredictability, without which the literary text cannot exist.

The advantage of this type of poem is that it allows one to continue expressing emotions that the redundancy of literary tradition rules out. The disadvantage is that it reduces the universe of potential readers, since those who cannot perceive its analogic dimensions will lose sight of the poem's mechanism—and what is worse, will not be able to admit that such a mechanism exists. This kind of perception demands the possession of a cultural repertory similar to that of the author, or an effort of documentation during the reading. And the author, isolated from the outset from communication with his average reader, will not be aware of the degree of erudition he will be demanding of the reader in each text.

This problem is even more serious when the "I" of the author is only implicit, and the analogy must be understood as a requisite prior to the designation of the personage, without the text having established any symptom of identification (but that case is not relevant to the poem which concerns us here).

I will mention briefly a similar process of indirect expression, to

which much of the foregoing applies. It is the process that consists of interposing between the author and his expression not a personage, but a previous work of art that speaks in his name. Nor are we confronted in this case with a gratuitous exhibition of culture. The two processes demand of the reader a creative participation, and offer in return to one capable of attaining it a greater aesthetic pleasure.

In neither case have I affirmed that it is a question of innovations introduced by the "novísimos." I would venture to say that its most proximate source is the mature work of Cernuda (think of "Luis de Baviera escucha Lohengrin" or "Ninfa y pastor, por Tiziano"). Other cases occur in the Spanish generation of the fifties, in modernism, and in the second half of the English or French nineteenth century.

*

- Here in Montreux,
rosette of lacustrian opals,
fifty years ago Hoyos y Vinent spun out
the dazzling story of Lady Rebecca Wintergay.
- 5 Those were undoubtedly
-belle époque-more festive times, with the bubbling
vivacity
of those who know they are ephemeral-the cannons
of the Kaiser thundered out the European millenium, the
Prussian blue
was never so sinister on any scaffold-.
- 10 Rubicund and nostalgic,
nubile Valkyrie of casino and bower,
the Great War ascended, the Dionysian beard
of Friedrich Nietzsche blazing in the wind.
Times of confusion, God help us, a vapor
- 15 was strangling the oil lamps, tarnishing
the magnolias before their time.
Something was being born, harsh, uncivil, intractable,
beyond the nacre-edged mirrors,
beyond the tango, the anemones,
- 20 shoulders, champagne, the snowy flesh,
the golden hair, the ermine,
the alabaster breasts, the delicate blue
roots of ivory hands,
the tinkling, the bell-so bucolic-

- 25 in the meadow of kisses and parasol.
They deserved to live, who can doubt it, those linden trees
where love raised up his steeds,
the salons of laudanum and porcelain china
perfumed by hashish from Montenegro.
- 30 A song of curled locks,
a silken entreaty came
from vaguely mythological postcards,
nebulously immodest, from chubby pink angels
-purple and stucco, plump cheek naked to the air-
- 35 presiding over epithalamiums.
The crushing of lilies, the grand old world
was parading its last coaches
through pools invaded by the slime.
And the air was already heavy with the smell of oil lamps,
hair shirts,
- 40 penitential candlewax, mea culpa,
revindications
of the inalienable human condition.
I, if I lived, Hoyos y Vinent, I live,
palladin of the last tourneys,
- 45 would break, broke the last lance,
rose sacrificed in the deer park,
would burn, burned the last words
restoring the old world, image
consecrated to the treadmill of the future,
- 50 final pirouette of that masquerade
flung over the void now.
I, if I lived, Hoyos y Vinent, I live,
we would give so much, believe me,
so that nothing would be changed, so
- 55 the grand old world could continue its dance of gallant
harmony,
forever turning, flame and song, turning
more and more, believe me, we would give so much
turning until we were dizzy, Hoyos y Vinent, I
ever more rapidly, so much, so that that world
- 60 might never perish, so the grand carnival
might continue, bustle and half boots,
forever turning, bell suspended
in the nuptial farandole of the dream.

Let us leave aside for the moment the title; I will return to it. The poem makes its keys and coordinates explicit in the first four verses

- 1 Here in Montreux . . .
3 fifty years ago . . .

We are situated in a time and space that are neither common nor contemporaneous to the reader, in contrast to what the immediate poetic tradition of the Spanish postwar period ordinarily imposed in that respect. Montreux is a Swiss city set into the shores of the lake of Geneva, one of the gathering places of the itinerant high society of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century: the memoirs of Isadora Duncan document it vividly.

If *Arde el mar* is published in 1966, and is written possibly two years earlier, verse 3 gives us the date 1913–14, that is to say the ante-chamber to the First World War.

- 2 rosette of lacustrian opals,

The rosette of a cathedral, like the stained glass windows, is a closed system of representation which, when it contains figurative elements allusive to the Bible or the lives of saints, is conceived as an iconic discourse whose reading disseminates a message of doctrinal order. The lacustrian city is seen thus as a compendium of the significance of a whole epoch and the way of life which characterized it, an epoch that will end with the outburst of the Great War. “Opals,” as a preciousness, defines that epoch as exquisiteness and beauty. “Lake” is, in its turn, a symbol of death; the verse indicates to us that the city and its aura are to be read as a discourse of beauty deceased.

- 3 . . . Hoyos y Vinent spun out

This is a reference to the Spanish writer Antonio de Hoyos y Vinent, who will act in the poem as an analogic personage, as an interpreter and witness of the mentioned epoch and as alter ego to the author.¹

- 4 the dazzling story of lady Rebecca Wintergay.

The reference is to a story by Hoyos entitled “The Eyes of Lady

Rebecca," contained in the volume *The Bells of Madame Locura*.² The title of this last volume provides us with the first clue about the title of the poem. The belled cap of the dunce and the fool, of one who avoids reality, is the music—the beautiful dimension—of his evasion. The poem alludes in this way to its quality as an exercise in irreality and of supernaturality, of a lost cause on the altar of the recovery of a vanished beauty.

"The Eyes of Lady Rebecca" is a short story, that situates three characters in conversation in a private club, in the small hours of the morning, in an undefined epoch but identifiable with the end of the century. One of them narrates the supernatural story of Lady Wintergay, a lady with beautiful and strange eyes, upon whom weighs the curse that her eyes will be blinded in the instant that their mistress falls in love. So does she confess at the moment of declaring her love for the narrator. After some time passes, he meets her in the company of a mysterious Dr. Nanetti (doctor, sage, theosophist), and when he manages to gain entry into her room he verifies to his horror that the curse has been fulfilled: the eyes of the lady, hieratic and with the orbits hollowed, repose like two jewels on a dresser. The story is dated September 1913 (v. 3).

From the appearance of the poem it does not seem as though the author were interested in the supernatural dimension of the story, although at the end of the century and during the Modernist movement the interest in theosophy and the occult sciences promotes the return to fantastic literature. I think that the selection of the story as a work of analogic art is due to its setting in the Belle Epoque and to its references to the refined life which those privileged by birth and fortune led during that period. The fascination with a world vanished and adorned by legend with all the charms lacking in our own is, doubtless, the basic intuition shaping the poem. To that world, to its fragility, and to the premonitions about its destruction in the years prior to 1914, a good part of the poem is dedicated. For example, see verses 17–35, in which allusions are made to its aristocratism, its luxury, exquisiteness, and *joie de vivre*, to its aesthetic irreality applied to daily life, its variety, its picturesqueness, conjoined simultaneously with an awareness of the decrepitude and uselessness of the ruling classes, of intimate tragedy and the need for escape through nervous exhaustion or drugs. All of this involves an indubitable fascination, but not devoid of a sense of history. Verses 39–43 allude to the beginning of a new world after 1918, and to "the revindications of our

inalienable human condition" (41–42), a phrase in which everything imaginable can be read, but in which it seems appropriate to imagine (because of the Swiss context, which refers us to the exile of Lenin in Geneva and Zurich), a benevolent allusion to the Russian Revolution.

Let us return to the analogic personage selected, Antonio de Hoyos. Between verses 43 and 58 the grammatical mechanism clearly alerts us to his identification with the author, thanks to the game that allows for syntactic ambivalence:

- 43 I, if I lived, Hoyos y Vinent, I live,
45 would break, broke the last lance
47 would burn, burned the last words
53 we would give so much
57 we could give so much
58 Hoyos y Vinent, I

In the unity formed by verses 43, 45 and 47, the name of Hoyos fulfills an ambivalent function: intended recipient of the invocation put in the mouth of the author, and at the same time subject of the verbs "broke" and "burned." The phrase can be laid out in the following manner:

I, Hoyos y Vinent, if I lived, would break / would burn
[and since I live, break, burn]
Hoyos y Vinent broke / burned.

That is to say: I, in this poem, break the last lance on behalf of the old world, as Hoyos y Vinent broke it in his story. The identification between the "I" of the author and his personage could not be more complete. The formula reveals an explicit process which, at any rate, would have functioned without it, since the designation of the personage is a sufficient symptom of the identificative analogy. In verses 53 and 57 the identity that has been established now allows the use of the first person plural, and in verse 58 the name of the novelist and the "I" of the author stand in identificative apposition. Verses 44, 48 to 51 or 59, and 60 affirm the role of Hoyos as the author understands it and as he would want to reincarnate it: to conserve the condemned image of the old world and thus to avoid, in a certain manner, its definitive disappearance.

The final verses return us to the title of the poem, suggesting here the musical turning of a merry-go-round, similar to that of the dance (verses 55–62), which symbolizes elegance, superiority, and at the same time the fragility and frivolity of a world incapable of working out its own survival.

In a speech given at Oxford in 1939 Paul Valéry said: "A poem is a kind of machine destined to produce the poetic mental state by means of words. Its result is uncertain, since nothing can be certain when acting on the spirit; but whatever the result and whatever its uncertainty, the construction of the machine forces one to resolve a great number of problems."³

In the poem under discussion, the machine consisted of utilizing an analogic work of art and personage as objectivizers of the poetic "I," conjoined with the explicit presence of that "I"; it could have been complicated even more by eliminating this last element.

Let no one imagine that a poem like "Bells" was actually written following the steps which I have just explicated. That would be equivalent to supposing that the technique and the craft come first, joined to the reasoned structuring of the effect they want to produce. An authentic poem rises in its integrity from a single spark of emotion in intuitive collaboration with the diverse knowledge of which the poet disposes: the machine moves from not existing to reveal itself integral and in function. The critic can take it apart and catalogue pieces and functions, but it fails if the one it was meant for doesn't manage to perceive it, in a tenth of a second, assembled and in motion.

Notes

1. Antonio de Hoyos y Vinent (1885–1940), aristocrat by birth, great night-walker and frequenter of taverns, was one of the most successful Spanish novelists of the first third of this century. His literary formula consisted of a wise combination of Modernism and Naturalism, already out of fashion in his day, and he was the beneficiary of a personal legend echoed by Sainz de Robles in *Raros y olvidados*:

A hundred times Hoyos confessed in print: "What most attracts and disturbs me about life are sin and night time. It is like the leitmotif of all my books; to wander through the uncharted streets in the small hours of the morning, to pry into all the corners, to peer into every grotto. Novels, mine, almost all of them lived. . . . There are three things which have impassioned me infinitely in literature:

mystery, sexual excess, and mysticism. In my books love is something horrendous and chilling." In effect, in the literature of Hoyos y Vinent the morbid, the strange, the demoniacal charm of our instincts, the black magic of perverted sexuality, these manifest themselves continuously. . . . Hoyos brought to the narrative genre sexual monstrosity, aesthetic and demoniacal complexes, deliriums on the very edge of mental alienation, aberrations as crazy as the black paintings of Goya.

See some of his titles: *Death in Life; Gold, Silk, Blood and Sun; The Surface of the Skin; Sin and Night; The Senility of Heliogabalus; Frivolity; Small Beast of Love.*

2. Reproduced in its entirety in the appendix.

3. Valéry, "Poésie et pensée abstraite," The Zahareff Lecture for 1939, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1939; reprinted in *Variétés*, V (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française, 1944) and in Valéry, *Oeuvres Complètes*, I, ed. J. Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 1314–39.

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Appendix

[Text of "The Eyes of Lady Rebecca"]

from *The Bells of Madame Madness:*

Novels by Antonio de Hoyos y Vinent]

Translated by Frederick H. Fornoff

"Bah! Believers or skeptics, trembling at any of the sounds with which night is filled, or travelling with a braggart's bluster through the darkness, none of us is exempt at least once in his life from the visit of Mystery. . . ."

"Man, how can you say that none of us . . .," objected Carlos Quiñones.

"None of us," insisted Jesús Valsera with profound conviction. "Of course, mystery doesn't exert the same influence on the frivolous table guests of Cardinal Richelieu or on the curious ladies who go in search of the secrets of the future to the house of Madame Thebas as it did on any elderly hidalgo of the Spanish 17th

century, lured out by prurient desires into the labyrinthine alleyways of the old cities in the wee hours of the morning, but whether we attribute it to natural or supernatural causes, in each of our lives a miracle has occurred, the supernatural event that led to the conversion of the prowling Don Juan into a saint venerated at our altars."

They were in one of the rooms at the Club, a gay little room, without character, decorated in the style of the 18th century, with that pleasant banality which ends up turning to uniformity. As it was an exclusive circle, the number of members being limited, it had not taken on that special aspect of places frequented by a large number of men, and with its white walls with molding and its curtains of purple damask, it had that strange uninhabited feeling of hotel rooms. Through the open doors several other empty and discreetly illuminated rooms could be seen, and beyond them, in a small room, four gentlemen were playing bridge. It was two in the morning, and after having spent a boring hour in Victory Manor and another while at Royal Manor, the decrepit Marquis of Monteria, Carlos Quiñones, and Jesús Valsera were chatting comfortably sprawled out on the large leather armchairs. Because of that mysterious attraction which the supernatural exerts on us, especially late at night, the conversation had come to a pause at one of those rare events in which Mystery seems to loom for a moment over the prosaic insipidity of our lives, and Jesús Valsera was narrating his case.

"I don't know if you, who are less enamored of Cosmopolis than I, have met Lady Rebecca Wintergay."

"I have a vague idea," insinuated Carlos. "I think she spent a season at Biarritz. But I never saw in her the admirable beauty of which people spoke. To me she always looked like a well-dressed doll, painted, bejeweled; but always that: something artificial, false, it's the right word: a doll."

With an air of confidential mystery, Jesús concurred: "it's true; there was something doll-like about her, something of the future Eve of Barbey d'Aureilly, and yet, her eyes. . . ."

"Yes; I thought she had an interesting look . . .," agreed Carlos.

"No, no," interrupted Valsera with unnecessary vehemence, "a look, no; it was her eyes." And he proceeded, elaborating on his idea. "The look is one thing, and the eyes are another. There are people who attract us, who suddenly awaken in us a great sympathy, who conquer us and even come to dominate us by their look, and if we look closely, their eyes are common, insignificant, and at times, even ugly. On the other hand, there are admirable eyes, but cold, inexpressive, dead, like the eyes of statues. The eyes of Lady Rebecca," continued the narrator, "were like that. Two emeralds or two perfect sapphires (changeable, like the waters of the sea); two portentous gems set in a slab of strange bluish-white jasper; two stolen peridots in the submerged palace of the daughter of the King of Is. Because the only comparison which those divine pupils suggested was with precious stones. Like them, they glowed, and yet they were dead; behind them there did not shine that mysterious light of intelligence, which is love,

hatred, ambition, enthusiasm or sadness; there was nothing, nothing but the void.”

A silent pause followed these last words. The other two, their interest piqued by the story, listened to him without further interruption; he went on:

“Nothing easier in the frivolous life of Biarritz than approaching her. Her luxury, her chic, that perpetual ostentation of fabulous jewels and magnificent trains, were what first attracted me; afterwards, her pupils pierced me. And I fell madly in love with her! Lady Wintergay, like all the ladies of the wild émigré caravan through the world, was a great flirt. A person used to such homage, she absorbed it amiably; an expert in worldly matters, she pursued her flirtations without false seizures of shame, but also without dangerous moments of weakness. And here we were, in the novel, when one night. . . .”

“One night?”

“One summer night, one of those marvelous nights in Biarritz, where sky and sea are like a prodigious palace of opals in the milky clarity of the satellite, we were talking, Lady Rebecca and I, leaning on the veranda of her Villa Sans Souci. There had been a costume party, and Rebecca, dressed as Scheherazade, all draped in tulle and sheer gauze overlaid with silver and pearls, neck and arms covered with enormous pearls of dazzling luster, was absolutely beautiful. The magic of the night, the beauty of the lady, the morbid weariness of the end of the party, and perhaps, why not?, the champagne wrapping my spirit in clouds of melancholy, shaded my voice with tones of sadness, steeped my words in restrained passion, and decanted into them, like a marvelous ointment, the bitterness of great, hopeless sorrow. Lady Wintergay seemed to listen to me with an attention unknown to me until then, overcome, against her will, by a sudden gust of passion. Her hands unintentionally destroyed a flower; her breast was heaving, and in her dead pupils, in those mysterious gems of enchantment, there shone a moist and impassioned look. Suddenly she spoke. Her voice was soft and musical, full of inflexions, of love and sadness. ‘Jesús, for heaven’s sake, for charity, for compassion, don’t speak to me that way. Ah, Jesús, Jesús, if you knew the horror, the mysterious fearfulness of my tragedy! I am condemned to be like this forever, to be a marble statue, something admirable, beautiful, divine, but which can only be contemplated in the desolate chill of the halls of a museum. My eyes, for them to go on living, it’s necessary that they always be thus: two precious stones, which never listen to what I’m saying, never can reflect what the spirit feels. The day’—she continued tragically, fatally—‘on which my eyes shine with the divine flame of passion, that day the flame itself will consume them.’ ”

Jesús stopped talking to light a cigar, without his friends, caught up in the interest of the strange story, daring to interrupt him, and finally he went on:

“Matters of great personal interest took me away from the French coast on the following day, and I lost sight of the interesting creature, who for a moment had come close to perturbing my spiritual serenity. Time passed; from time to time I had vague word of her wandering life and, finally, one day I learned that Lady Rebecca Wintergay,

embroiled in a great passion, had decided to challenge the terrible fatality which, according to her, weighed like a curse over her existence.

"Bah!" laughed Carlos, ironically. "She grew bored with you . . . and that was it!"

When his interlocutors expected an explosion of self-love, they heard him say in a voice tinged with sadness:

"If only that had been the case! Then, at least, she would not have left an indelible mark in my memory." Then he continued: "Time passed, I took up my forays through Europe, and one day, on entering the dining-room of Montreux Palace, I stopped dead in my tracks. Seated at a table, in front of me, Lady Rebecca Wintergay was dining! In the lavish sumptuousness of the dining-room, in the reverberation of the lights, in the scenography of tropical plants, amid women dressed in silk, plumes, furs and lace, the English woman stood out, like a queen of legend. Dressed all in white chantilly, on which shimmered the dazzle of diamonds and emeralds, she sat serenely, ecstatic as an icon. She was beautiful, infinitely beautiful, but with the inert beauty that had disturbed me in other times. Her marvelous pupils had even less life than before, and they remained motionless, fixed on an imaginary point. It was useless for me to bow courteously, useless that throughout the meal I did not divert my gaze from her; Lady Rebecca seemed absent, distant."

"When the meal was over, I ran to the desk of the hotel and asked for the guest book. There was Lady Rebecca Wintergay. And, beside her name, another name which instilled an irrational disquiet in my spirit: Doctor Nanetti."

Silence ensued once again. Carlos and Monteria were listening with that disquiet with which we listen to ghost stories. Jesús seemed to be caught up in a great excitement. The story continued:

"For a few days I lived in suspenseful proximity to that rare lady. I saw her in the dining-room, at the concert, in her motorcar, always in the company of the mysterious doctor, always motionless, with her eyes constantly fixed on an imaginary point. It was useless for me to seek an occasion to speak to her alone, useless to wait for the departure of the doctor, who never seemed to leave her. Finally, one day. . . ."

The hair rose up on the nape of Jesús's neck, and cold sweat ran down his forehead.

"Finally, one day, on crossing a corridor, I saw the door to her room opened wide. I looked in and . . . Lady Rebecca! She was alone and turned toward the balcony; she seemed absorbed in the contemplation of the lake. With great resolve, I entered. If only I had fled! On hearing the sound of my footstep, Lady Wintergay uttered a weak cry, and turned toward me, holding out her hands, the way blind people do when they imagine they are about to plunge into an abyss."

"I drew back mute with horror. In that face of statuary beauty, in the pink nacre of her skin, in which the mouth was like a passion-flower, her eyes had disappeared, and two black holes traced the horrendous sarcasm of Death, the atrocious irony of skulls! On a table, like two dazzling gems, her blue eyes shone!"

Montreux, September 1913